

MY VIEW \ WE'RE A WEIRD MOB

I'm Australian. Two months ago in New York, I found myself saying this over and over again like a parrot. And every time, the person who'd asked the question would respond with a broad smile. Their eyes would crinkle up at the corners as they looked at my rebellious curls and olive complexion and burst out laughing. What were they expecting? Jennifer Hawkins, Nicole Kidman, Naomi Watts? And why were they laughing? When I finally asked, I was told, "Not at all, it's just that you're all so funny and kinda unreined." It was a compliment. A testament to the fact that we've milked our convict-history cow until it moos and finally have our own identity.

Like all countries, we have our share of idiots. Three Australians die each year testing if a nine-volt battery works on their tongues. One hundred-and-forty-two were injured in 1999 by not removing all the pins from new shirts. Each year 58 are injured by using sharp knives instead of screwdrivers. Thirty-one have died since 1996 by watering their Christmas tree while the fairy lights were plugged in. Eight had serious burns in 2000 trying on a new jumper with a lit cigarette in their mouths. Five hundred-and-forty-three were admitted to emergency in the past two years after opening bottles of beer with their teeth. And, if you haven't choked on your Weeties yet, in 2000 eight adorable Australians cracked their skull while throwing up into the toilet.

Australia is a country of contradictions: road-sign warnings of kangaroos and snakes and festivals where you can sample 45 types of cheese. We love to hate the Poms, but we love the flapdoodle of a royal wedding.



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(SUPPLIED)

We worship our cricketers on a winning streak, until they lose. Then they're just crap and past it and a bunch of pansies. Regrettably, in some parts of the country a pizza will get to your house faster than an ambulance. We leave our much-cherished and expensive cars in the driveway but lock our jars of assorted screws and lawn mowers in the garage. We operate schizophrenically as a once-colonial society, keeping one eye on the Queen, and as a multicultural community, keeping the other eye on each other. A fair go for all often excludes our indigenous people. While some communities are so concerned over the fact that Muslim women can't use public swimming pools because there are men present, that they offer female-only sessions. More of us know the words to *Khe Sanh* than we do the national anthem.

But when everything goes hopelessly and messily wrong, we respond not necessarily by following the rules, but in our own bumbling style. We plunge recklessly into raging rivers to pluck people to safety. We stand on roofs putting out a fire with buckets of water. We pluck people from sinking cars. We drip water into the parched mouth of a badly burned koala. We sleep with Aeroguard on, then get up, slide on our gumboots, put on a cap emblazoned with "Get A Dog Up Ya" and volunteer to clean streets.

When heartbreaking crises happen, we all pitch in because we all feel the pain. We struggle to comprehend the forces of nature and say "no worries" as we're putting on an apron with plastic breasts to barbecue sausages for strangers who no longer have a home. Sorry, I'm getting more emotional than a Bob Hawke book launch. See ya. \

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